

## **The Majestic Architecture of the McCoy Memorial Library**

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In the small southern Illinois town of McLeansboro with a population of about 3,000, there is a beautiful landmark. It is the McCoy Memorial Library. Its architectural style is awesome, majestic, inspiring, and beautiful, and many photographers immediately recognize its wonderful photogenic qualities.

The library was constructed by Aaron G. Cloud, a prominent banker, as a home for his wife and two children. The architects were the Reid Brothers of Evansville who also constructed the magnificent Hotel del Coronado, a landmark in San Diego, California. From 1880 to 1884, 75 men worked on the Cloud Home at an average pay rate of \$2 for a 10-hour day. Construction cost \$22,000. The Reid Brothers had help from craftsmen from the Tri-state area to as far away as Germany. The original linen blueprints can be seen on the second floor of the library.

The building is a 2 ½-story brick structure on a sandstone base. While of no pure architectural style, the building is significant for the unique mixing of popular mid- to late-nineteenth century American architectural styles. The asymmetrical massing of the house about the prominent central tower reflects an Italian Villa style. The tall first floor windows and prominent chimneys with elaborate caps are characteristics of the Second Empire style. The variety in color and overall massings, the use of bay windows and windows having large square lights with borders of smaller square panes of glass are trademarks of the Queen Anne style.

The whole house was architecturally designed so that all of the corners and walls are notched. As the building gets older and settles, it settles into the notches and becomes stronger. The walls are over 20 inches thick and the foundation is nearly four feet thick. Also in thinking

of the future, the builders laid the brick, made in McLeansboro with strips of wood in between. In case of an earthquake, the brick should not loosen or crumble.

The lavish exterior is dominated by an off-center tower at the rooftop balanced by a circular turret, numerous dormer windows with a front veranda topped by white carpenter's lace. This tower rises a full story above the red brick walls of the main house and mansard roof. The roof also includes a black wrought iron widow's watch. From the peak one can see for 65 miles.

The interior was finished and furnished luxuriously in the most excellent taste. The massive solid woodwork of the entire house is like satin to the touch.

The entrance from a large porch, which faces east, leads one into a spacious hall extending from the front to the rear of the house. Opening from the hall on the north is a large drawing room. It is 18 feet by 36 feet in size with a ceiling 14 feet high. This was the height of all the ceilings on the first floor. This room now houses the library books. The woodwork is solid walnut, hand carved, as is all like the woodwork of the other rooms on the first floor, with the exception of the parlor, which is of birdseye maple. The parlor is now a library reading room. Opening from the hall on the south is a very large room which was the dining room. The fireplace in this room occupies almost the entire south wall. All the rooms are similarly provided with appropriate fireplaces and mantels from around the world.

The house has nine different kinds of wood throughout including oak, walnut, cherry, chestnut, and red cherry. The majestic stairwell has 87 spindles that took over two weeks to clean. It was made of hand-carved walnut and led to the upper hallway. The wide carpeted steps are only a few inches apart which makes it seem like one is not even climbing steps. The bedrooms have very small closets because only one or two day's clothing were kept in the

rooms. Cedar lined clothes closets with eight-foot white pine doors were in a separate room to keep full wardrobes.

At one time there were five servants in the house who had their own separate living area. The servants' stairwell turns 10 times from top to bottom. Behind the stairwell is a dumbwaiter to hoist food up and down.

Along with two other residences in McLeansboro built by Aaron Cloud, this home had the first gas lights supplied by gasoline tanks, and the first running water supplied by a system of pumps and pressure tanks.

When Aaron E. Cloud died on April 24, 1893, he entrusted the house to his daughter, Mary E. Cloud McCoy. She and her husband, Chalon G. McCoy, lived in the home for the rest of their lives. They had no children. Mrs. McCoy believed in education and wanted the home to serve a good and useful purpose after her death. She gave much thought to the preparation of her will. Upon her death on August 21, 1921, she gave the building to the city of McLeansboro with a \$5,000 endowment. She specified that the building be made into a public library and that the interest of the endowment fund only be used for the library. The library was also to be dedicated to the memory of her father and mother, Aaron G. and Eleanor Cloud.

The library opened its doors on December 21, 1921. In March 1925, a terrible tornado swept through the town. With McLeansboro having no hospital at the time, the library served as an emergency hospital. The building continues to serve the community as an information center with books, newspapers, magazines, microfilm, and access to the Shawnee Library System service. The Hamilton County Historical Society maintains the second floor of the building as a museum. The library has been listed in *Readers' Digest* section of "Off The Beaten Path, A Guide to More than 1,000 Scenic and Interesting Places." In 1978 it was listed as a National

Historic Site. The library is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places and on the state register. [From J. R. Beckenbach, *A Preservation Plan*; John M. Eckley, “Unforgotten Lady,” *Egyptian Key*, Aug. 1946; “McCoy Memorial Library,” [www.mcleansboro.com/community/mccoy/htm](http://www.mcleansboro.com/community/mccoy/htm) (Aug. 15, 2003); *Reader’s Digest*, “Off The Beaten Path”; *Evansville Courier and Press*, July 24, 1977; Mark. A Thompson, *Hamilton County, Illinois*.]